

This is a transcript of the T/TAC William and Mary podcast "Taylor's Story: My Experience with Asperger's Syndrome and I'm Determined"

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Intro]

Lee Anne SULZBERGER: I am sitting here today with John Newsome, and Debbie Newsome, and Taylor Newsome to talk a little bit about the I'm Determined project in Virginia. So Taylor, we're going to start with you. Talk to us a little bit about how and why it's important to you to share your One-Pager and your Good Day Plan with your teachers and your parents.

TAYLOR Newsome: Well, kind of think that people need to know this stuff. What was the question?

SULZBERGER: Explain to us about how it's important and why it's important for you to share your Good Day Plan and your One-Pager with teachers or parents. Why is that such an important thing for you? You said that it's important that people know about you.

TAYLOR: It's important to know that-teachers need to know that everybody's different and that nobody's perfect.

JOHN Newsome: How does it help you?

TAYLOR: It helps me because then, like I know why I'm not, um, why I'm messing up at social outings and stuff.

SULZBERGER: John and Debbie, tell us how does it feel for you to sit and see your child talking to such a big audience about this? What are your feelings?

DEBBIE Newsome: It's remarkable because I would never have been able to do that at twelve.

JOHN: Yeah--just a year ago, I mean, he wouldn't have been able to do this. The program, I think, done helped him more with confidence than anything because his self-confidence to get up in front of people and say anything--he's been the kid that if it's more than three people in the room he goes over to the corner, gets safe away. He wants to be unseen and unheard, and he don't like a large crowd of people, but this has really kind of brought him out of his shell and helped him to, to do this kind of thing...getting up in front of people and talking, and I think still he gets nervous, as you, as he is now, but he gets nervous at times, but once he gets going he can roll along with it and...

SULZBERGER: So, Taylor, what are some of the things that being involved with the self-determination and I'm Determined project have helped you with?

TAYLOR: People know me better. They know why I mess up. Like, they know why I can't do this, am I interested in this? And...All kinds of stuff like that because of a simple explanation that I have Asperger's syndrome. And that's just, like, the explanation for everything-- downhill. Usually in middle, in-- not in middle school, in elementary school, was not fun for me because she didn't follow the "big book" of me.

SULZBERGER: The "big book" of you. That's great. What are some--?

TAYLOR: Which is this big book that my mom has.

SULZBERGER: What are some specific things that have changed either, Taylor, that you've noticed or that you guys as parents have seen in school and some things that have made it a more positive experience since being involved in I'm Determined?

DEBBIE: I think it's made him more aware of what he needs in order to function in a school day, and he's not ashamed to go and tell a teacher, you know, "I need help with this," and that, you know, he's been able to also sell, set some goals for life. That's just a big thing for him and for any kid, actually.

SULZBERGER: Is there a particular tool you like best, Taylor, whether it's the One-Pager or the (TAYLOR: The goal) g--

SULZBERGER: Tell me, what do you like about that?

TAYLOR: Um, coming up with a goal.

SULZBERGER: Do you, do you know what your goal is? What are you working on right now?

TAYLOR: Build FPS games.

SULZBERGER: What do you guys think, and this is for parents and Taylor for you. What is the most important thing that teachers should know about their students? I've heard a lot of good stuff this morning, but what do you guys think is the most important thing that teachers should know?

TAYLOR: That everybody's different.

JOHN: They should know the disabilities and what they need to learn and, uh, be willing to help them with that. I mean, uh, I know in, in the elementary school we had some struggles with teachers that didn't understand Asperger's or, I don't know if they didn't read his IEP or didn't care. He goes to a lot of work and my wife and all to plan these IEPs and they need to be followed, and I think that's, you know, I think that people are more aware because of the I'm Determined program it's, the IEPs get followed closer now than what they ever had before. And he's able to self-advocate for his self, I mean he'll speak up and say "Hey, this is in my IEP. This is what I need." You know, "I need my notes written", or whatever it may be. It could be as small as where he sits in the classroom to be able to pay attention, but he, you know, he don't mind speaking up and saying it and I think just being aware of everything and--

DEBBIE: And that's very important because we can't be there with him all day (LA: Absolutely) and his special education teacher can't follow him around all day so he needs to be aware of what he needs to be successful and to be able to voice that.

SULZBERGER: Has that changed you all's involvement as parents with the school with Taylor being able to be so articulate and be able to communicate what his needs are?

DEBBIE: I think so. I, I feel--not so much an outsider now I guess. In the elementary school, you know, you, you tend to baby 'em more I guess and walk in with them every day and now that they get to middle school for one thing the child doesn't want you as involved because they've got to that age (**SULZBERGER:** uh huh) that, you know, it's not cool to have mom and dad walk in with them every day. We have good communication with his special ed teachers, his general ed teachers as well, some of them, so I feel more involved and in tune with what's going on, and he's able to communicate what's going on with us better.

SULZBERGER: Would you be willing to tell us a story or tell us a time about when you feel like your skills of being able to talk about yourself and your needs was really either interesting or funny or..

TAYLOR: I have two.

SULZBERGER: You have two? Do you want to share them?

TAYLOR: Yes. First, um's, when, um basically what happened was is that report card had my a-Autism on the top, and I started freaking out and then I went and my mom she told me I had Asperger's, and Dad told me I had Asperger's and they was expecting maybe crying and all kinds of stuff. I was like "Ok." So I was just-- walked away and--- It just explained everything in the past. How I didn't have any friends and I'd be all upset and...

JOHN: Yeah, I think it helped him 'cause we, we kind of sheltered him from this when we, even though we had knew he had had Asperger's for a while there, didn't want to--waiting for the right time to tell him (**SULZBERGER:** right), and you don't know, and she had child's books she had all got for him so the day that we were to tell him about this he could set down, read the books and we could explain to him and all that and we was sitting there eating dinner, and Debbie got up to go change to go to the gym. He said, "Dad, they made a mis-- a mistake on my report card today." And I said, "They did?" He said, "Yeah." I said, "What do you mean they made a mistake?" He said, "Well, on the top of it, it says autism." He said, "I don't have autism." And I said, "Well Taylor, do you know what autism is?" He said, "Yeah, it's a learning disability." He said, "I get A's and B's for God's sake. I don't have a learning disability." And I said, "Yeah, well..." Debbie came on out then (laughs) and we got one all, set down and started telling him--'course she's sitting over there with tears running down her face and he's like, "Mom, what's wrong?" and she said, "Well, you have Asperger's" and this is what it, what it means, and this, you know, social skills and things." And it like woke him up. He was like a light bulb went off. He was like, "Hey, yeah, that's why I do this?" and she said, "Well, honey, aren't you upset about this?" He said, "Am I going to get over it? Is this going to go away?" She said, "No, it don't go away, and it's, you know, it's not, you--it's something you'll always have." And she said, "Aren't you upset?" He said, "There's nothing I can do about it." (Laughs) so I (**SULZBERGER:** Right) just got to go on with it so he was just...and he's really took it well. I mean, he went on with it fine. We were more upset than he was--telling him 'cause we didn't know how he would, how he would react, but I think it's actually helped him by knowing because now he knows, and it's not--he's just opened up and this--once his I'm Determined program started, then he's seen other people, Tori. I think the day she talked was the first time in

Northumberland that he heard her. It kind of woke him up to hey, listen, I can tell people about this, I don't have to, have to hide it, and he's very vocal about it. He don't mind telling anybody.

TAYLOR: I kind of feel nervous sometimes--depends on who it is.

SULZBERGER: If there was a school or if there were students that were-- that hadn't decided yet to be part of I'm Determined, what--

TAYLOR: They should.

SULZBERGER: They should? Tell us why (**TAYLOR:** Because) they should.

TAYLOR: You know, school ain't perfect. They're OK, but they ain't the best, and there's always something better.

JOHN: If a school didn't have I'm Determined, why should they do it?

TAYLOR: 'Cause they should. It's like, it makes their students better.

SULZBERGER: And do you think it has some benefits (**TAYLOR:** and even if you ain't disabled it helps you) for all students?

SULZBERGER: Yep

DEBBIE: And when you know what your strengths are and what your weaknesses are-- that just makes you so much more empowered and be able to work towards that goal.

TAYLOR: Right

SULZBERGER: I invited Taylor to tell a story and he told us a story about the report card. Do you guys have any stories about, sort of, some positive benefits, or, or things that you've seen that were really a neat experience?

DEBBIE: You know, when we first went to that first transition fair and he did not want to be seen, and most of the other kids got up before the group. And even if they weren't talking they were standing up in the front of the room of these people and- with their presentations going on, and he set down beside me and he had a death grip on my arm. He did not want to get up and when they finally said his name, he did put his hand up and kind of wave a little bit. But, then, when Tori spoke, after that I think it made him see he wasn't alone.

TAYLOR: Yeah

DEBBIE: And when he saw these other kids talk he knew, you know I'm not the only one that has something going on. And then the next time that they presented--I believe it was to the, the (**JOHN:** faculty) entire faculty of Northumberland (**SULZBERGER:** Wow) County, which was, you know, a lot of people. He just felt the urge to get up and tell them what his disability was, and I was cringing because, I was like-- he's wanted, wanted to keep this to himself, but now, You know, once it's out there, it's out

there. And when I saw-- he just was so brave by getting up there and doing that and since then it's been just like, a s., just a snow (**TAYLORE**; It's just easy) ball effect I guess. It's just he; he's willing to talk about it. It makes me feel more at ease because I know he's not ashamed of who he is, and I just think it's great.

SULZBERGER: So I thank you so much (**DEBBIE**: thank you) for sharing a little bit of your time and, umm your experience with I'm Determined...

[MUSIC: T/TAC William and Mary Podcast Outro]